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*Mechanisms and strategies to evaluate your teaching at universities.*

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## **Mechanisms and strategies to evaluate your teaching at university**

by Lyn Alderman

#### Acknowledgment

This resource is developed from literature and the thesis:

“A Shifting Landscape: An evaluation of the pedagogical impacts of the 2002 Australian Government Review of Higher Education”

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## Contents

	page
<b>Strategies to evaluate your teaching</b>	<b>1</b>
Assessment review	1
Accreditation panels	1
Appeals by students	1
Assessment debriefing	1
Assessment results	1
Examination debriefing	2
Exhibition of student work	2
Curriculum review	2
Course report	2
Coursework studies	2
Curriculum review	2
Industry feedback	2
Teaching review	3
Conference attendance	3
Conference presentation	3
Network with colleagues on an informal basis to discuss teaching	3
Peer review by a colleague	3
Personal plan for teaching	3
Policies on teaching and learning	3
Professional association education guidelines	4
Professional development activities/workshops	4
Teaching philosophy	4
Teaching portfolio	4
Team teaching	4
Video vignette	4
<b>Evaluation mechanisms</b>	<b>5</b>
Action research	5
Literature review	5
Reflection	5
Research study	5
Retreat/planning session	5
Scholarly reading	5
Scholarship through publication	6
<b>Sources of feedback</b>	<b>6</b>
Ethics approval	6
Mystery student asked to observe your teaching	6
Observation	6
Student consultative committee	6
Student feedback	6
Staff meetings/minutes	7
<b>References</b>	<b>8</b>



# Mechanisms and strategies to evaluate your teaching at university

## Strategies to evaluate your teaching

### Assessment review

#### Accreditation panels

Within an accreditation cycle of review, an external accreditation panel will make recommendations on different aspects of a course. This panel is usually comprised of representatives from stakeholders such as industry, community, graduate students and colleagues from other institutions. Although a 3 to 5 year cycle is common practice, there is a great deal of merit in reviewing the curriculum on an annual or half-cycle to move or change in a more rapid way.

#### Appeals by students

When a student goes through the appeals process it is often in response to a perceived inequity in process, mark or condition of the assessment task. At times there are patterns that emerge from the appeals process that offer insight to the teaching and learning within a local context that lead to change of practice. There is an opportunity offered to reflect on the appeals presented for a member of academic staff, a unit of study, course or within a school. This reflection on one component of the appeals process can be an effective way to evaluate teaching and learning.

#### Assessment debriefing

When assessment tasks are returned there is an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with students about the assessment task, method of assessment, duration, weighting, criteria, outcomes and alignment with content and teaching method. Refinements to the assessment task and procedures can then form the basis of any subsequent delivery.

#### Assessment results

The formative and summative assessment results offer feedback on the teaching, content, assessment tasks and student engagement. A review of the assessment results across several deliveries of the unit may reveal themes and/or differences within cohorts of students, teaching staff and curriculum.

### Examination debriefing

An ongoing issue with examinations is the very narrow opportunity for two-way feedback. The academic staff receive feedback in the form of student work on the examination paper and then the students receive a mark. An examination debriefing held in Week 2 or 3 of the following semester offers students an opportunity for feedback on the examination paper, and for feedback to the students from the assessors.

### Exhibition of student work

An exhibition of student work may occur at the end of an assessment task, end of a unit, end of semester of a course or faculty, in a capstone unit or at graduation. It offers students and academic staff an opportunity to review the work of students at one point. In addition, academic staff can use this opportunity to collectively discuss the course cohesion, content, teaching style, assessment tasks and resources pertaining to the exhibition of work.

## Curriculum review

### Course report

An annual *course report* will offer an opportunity for reflection in and on the delivery of the course and its components. This offers an opportunity to document feedback and plan for course improvements for the next 12 months. A review of a number of course reports is often a starting point for curriculum review.

### Coursework studies

Completion of a structured course leading to a qualification in teaching in higher education offers feedback on a number of levels. As a student you are in a position to reflect on your own practice and understanding while engaging with the curriculum. There is an opportunity to share your knowledge and practice with other students. Also, there is the formative and summative feedback you receive as a student engaged in coursework.

### Curriculum review

At different points in the lifecycle of a course there are opportunities to conduct a curriculum review. These points include course development, accreditation review and transition into a newly designed course. There are additional ways to view a curriculum review through level, cohesion of units or majors, assessment practice, change to educational requirements of a professional body.

### Industry feedback

Industry is a stakeholder in higher education. The feedback from industry can include review and assessment panels, employment, membership of professional bodies, awards, scholarships and testimonials.



## Teaching review

### Conference attendance

Attending a conference on teaching and learning will provide an opportunity to network and share current thinking. As conferences are usually developed around several streams, it is possible to target a conference and theme to suit the individual interest or professional development plan.

### Conference presentation

Presenting a paper at a conference offers an opportunity to reflect, publish and invite peer feedback about your own practice and/or research. If the paper is peer reviewed, this process will provide an external evaluation of the appropriateness of your paper, the overall conference theme and, more specifically, feedback on your writing and scholarship.

### Network with colleagues on an informal basis to discuss teaching

A discussion with colleagues about your teaching practice on a regular or irregular basis can be informative and offer feedback from someone who is familiar with the variable contexts within your teaching environment. Collaboration, sharing of knowledge and experience are major benefits, but there are also opportunities for shared reflection.

### Peer review by a colleague

Peer review may be from an informal basis — for example, where you ask a colleague to come into your lecture, workshop or session and ask for feedback on your teaching — through to a formal review that is part of an institution's quality framework. The observations might focus on the teaching, an activity, student engagement or the resources and curriculum. Peer review by a colleague is often an annual practice within a personal teaching plan.

### Personal plan for teaching

Using evaluation tools and collecting evidence is often the precursor to a personal plan for teaching. Teachers in higher education are a diverse group who move between institutions, disciplines and roles within higher education. At different times your previous experience in teaching, a new setting or new technology might result in you being something of a 'novice'. In these circumstances a personal plan for teaching over the next 12 months is one way to embed your professional development within your career and work plans.

### Policies on teaching and learning

A policy is an intervention that offers a framework to support teaching and learning for all stakeholders (that is, institution, academic staff and students). All policies aim to support an environment conducive to teaching and learning and offer a way to encourage minimum standards in practice. A policy is usually descriptive or prescriptive. Descriptive policies describe issues in more general terms, whereas prescriptive policies are quite precise and set very explicit parameters. As policies offer a structured framework for teaching and learning, all teachers are encouraged to map their practice against these guidelines as a minimum standard.

### **Professional association education guidelines**

Many professional associations have established a detailed set of education guidelines for courses across Australia. There is an opportunity to map your curriculum against these external guidelines at an individual or course level.

### **Professional development activities/workshops**

The opportunity to engage with new content, review practice and network with colleagues through participation in professional development activities and workshops is standard practice across higher education. In a similar way to formal coursework, there is an opportunity to share your knowledge and practice with other students. Also, there is the formative and summative feedback you receive as a student engaged in coursework.

### **Teaching philosophy**

‘A statement of teaching philosophy allows you to articulate what you believe your role and objectives are as a teaching and what learning objective you set for your students. The statement should highlight how and why you adopt certain approaches to teaching to achieve these objectives’ (National Tertiary Education Industry Union, 2005).

### **Teaching portfolio**

A teaching portfolio is a common requirement for promotion within higher education, with applications for employment and in teaching award submissions. The portfolio offers an opportunity to approach evaluation of your teaching in a very structured manner and gather evidence to support your claims.

### **Team teaching**

Team teaching is often an opportunity to collaborate with colleagues in the learning environment. It allows you to observe and be observed within a single activity, session and with one group of students. It can be used in many ways. It is a support structure when trying something new, a sharing of workload or as an evaluation opportunity for joint reflection.

### **Video vignette**

There is a range of media available to record or video you and your students during a teaching/facilitation session or activity. It is difficult to observe your own teaching practice but a video vignette offers an opportunity to view yourself ‘in action’ at another time. As part of professional development, the teaching video is a powerful tool. A collection of videos can offer historical evidence of your professional development.

## Evaluation mechanisms

### Action research

‘Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out’ (Hemmis & McTaggart, 1988).

### Literature review

The literature review is a basic tool used for research into teaching and learning and is relevant when researching into your teaching practice and specialist area. This review will keep you up to date with scholarly writing and provide information for self-reflection on your content and teaching practice.

### Reflection

Schon’s (1983 and 1987) theory of ‘reflection in and on action’ is particularly relevant in the context of higher education, where you often learn about teaching at the same time that you start to teach. In this model it is important to reflect on your practice, consider the theory behind the practice, plan your approach to teaching and then reinvigorate or renew your teaching practice. This *action cycle* is invaluable as a structured framework for evaluation of practice in higher education.

### Research study

Completion of a research project leading to a qualification in teaching in higher education offers feedback on a number of levels. As a student you can investigate or further develop your own practice and understanding while engaging with the scholarly work. There is an opportunity to share your knowledge and practice with other practitioners and reflect in a very structured, rigorous manner.

### Retreat/planning session

The *retreat* is an opportunity for a group to reflect come together and collaborate. At times, the retreat may be an evaluation of past practice or a planning session to address the recommendations arising from the analysis of feedback from another source. It offers an opportunity to re-establish personal and group goals to improve teaching and learning practice.

### Scholarly reading

There is increasing emphasis on the ‘scholarly reading’ of teaching and learning in higher education. For anyone engaged in teaching it is important to evaluate your own practice in terms of developments in the field. It allows holistic self reflection. Further, you can reflect on your own practice and compare where it sits within a broader theoretical context.

### **Scholarship through publication**

Scholarship through publication of your teaching and research offers an opportunity for peer review against a set of established standards or criteria. As publication is an accepted practice across the whole community in higher education, it is a way to evaluate and disseminate your teaching and research. The feedback from this process can then inform your practice.

## **Sources of feedback**

### **Ethics approval**

Within the ethics approval process there is an opportunity to review a project or research study from an ethical standpoint and to analyse the risk for the institution, participants and researchers. As ethics occurs early in a project or study it offers a rigorous external evaluation of instruments, participant documentation and risk management. At the end of the project or research study there is a second opportunity to compare the ethics approval and the final outcomes for alignment.

### **Mystery student asked to observe your teaching**

The concept of a 'mystery shopper' is a common evaluation tool within business. In the context of higher education, the 'mystery student' is invited to come into the learning environment and observe and evaluate practice from a student's perspective. It is the observation from the unique perspective of an independent student that offers useful insights into your teaching practice and student engagement.

### **Observation**

Observation offers an ongoing opportunity to evaluate an experience, task, skill or outcome. It can be more passive when the observer is somewhat removed or it can involve active participation where the observer is involved with other participants.

### **Student consultative committee**

A student consultative committee offers a structured framework for students to become actively engaged with the evaluation of their units, course and school. At one institution these committees were chaired by a head of school and all students were invited to attend and offer feedback or simply ask questions. With a formal agenda, minutes and regular meetings, a school is able to receive and deal with rich, qualitative feedback in an ongoing manner. Questions are usually answered within one meeting; however, at times other academic staff are invited to attend a subsequent meeting to offer further feedback to students.

### **Student feedback**

At different times in their learning cycle, a student enrolled in a course in higher education can be a consumer, a learner and an ambassador. When evaluating the teaching and learning at an institution it is standard practice in Australia to collect feedback from students. The data collection methods can be quite informal (suggestion box, class discussions, student emails) through to the formal instruments (student surveys, focus groups and interviews).

Whether feedback is positive or negative, evidence of students' perceptions and themes derived from collated data is a rich source of evidence. It should be noted that this is only one source of evidence.

### **Staff meetings/minutes**

A staff meeting and the recorded minutes are evidence of discussions, issues and ideas shared with colleagues with a shared interest. In teaching, it is a way of keeping abreast of developments within the school and — in particular — with your course.

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